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How To Pick Up A Sailor

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HOW TO PICK UP A SAILOR

You will receive special treatment because you are one of the ladies. Doors will be opened for you, cigarettes lit, drinks bought. Remember the law of supply and demand. Remember this, too: attraction is relative.

When your girlfriend goes to the bar, you will be alone with them. Stand away from the pool table: this is their altar. You must be invited to approach. Ask a naive question, like, "Does it matter whether you sink a stripe or a solid?" Use as much jargon as you recall from *The Color of Money*.

He will place his right hand on the ledge by your left elbow and lean in, motioning with his bottle every so often. He explains pool as though you asked him to write a manual for beginners. Smile and nod. Be pleased to have bridged the conversation gap, albeit with your ignorance. This is a good strategy: be interested in the things he knows about.

Your girlfriend slaps the acid-washed jeans of the one in the "Pirates" cap. This is not your style. Ask your sailor about the Navy. What he does, where he lives. In a dormitory? With many roommates?

Maybe he's the taller of the two. Maybe the better looking. He wears a white tank top under a short-sleeved shirt from Chess King. His aftershave smells as clean as he looks. Remind yourself that attraction is relative, and that you are in a country-western bar called The Sore Thumb on a Saturday night.

When it is his turn, he will line up his shot and keep telling you how he's learning electronics in order to fire

and repair weapons. Do not bother asking him to repeat
himself when you can't hear over the jukebox, wailing,
I got friends in low places
where the whiskey drowns
and the beer chases
my blues away

What he tells you is not important.

He will buy you a drink. Ask for a margarita. Drink the
margarita with the straw; lick salt from the rim of the glass.

This is a bar where a woman named Sally holds the dart
championship and a working man can afford to buy drinks
for several women. The bar smells of cigarettes and beer,
of Mr. Clean and Speed Stick, of musky perfume, but does
not smell of bodies. The university smells of patchouli,
White Shoulders, stress, old laundry, and sweat inter-
mingled with other bodily fluids.

When he asks what you're studying in school, do not
tell him the whole truth. Tell him you study anthropology;
do not tell him how your girlfriend said, "What say we do
participant observation at The Sore Thumb's cultural
scene? Have a few drinks with boys from the base, learn
the two-step?" If he asks, tell him anthropology is the
study of cultures other than your own.

He will drop his arm around your shoulder as a sign of
possession to the rest of the bar. Your consent is not
requested, but implied.

In your high school diary is written that someday, you
and a date will be at a movie, and he will yawn and stretch,
dropping his arm around your shoulder. You do not feel
the carbonation in your bloodstream from your fantasy,

three years ago.

He is older than you. Wonder what he knows, what he has learned in those extra years of life he has experienced. Wonder what, if anything, he has up on you.

Your girlfriend learns the two-step with her sailor, dancing in jaunty strides. You see another couple on the floor, a short, lean man in a Hicks gas cap and a Marlboro T-shirt with a large, smiling woman. They are smooth on the floor together, so intent on each other in their dance that, you imagine, they see as if with closed eyes, too focused on the form of the other to imagine the backdrop. She, in her best fluffy-bang hairstyle, her size 18 mini-skirt and low-cut jungle-print blouse, is the size of a tank, much bigger than he, yet more graceful to watch. Her smile is pinned to his eyes.

And the music will stop. Your sailor will curl his fingers into yours and tug you to the jukebox. “What all do you listen to?” he will ask. Do not select the rock song. Select the Judds. Memorize the chorus, and whisper the words under your breath. Move your lips. You will blend right in.

He curls his clean, thick fingers into yours and tugs you to the dance floor. This is your participant observation.

*One hundred and one
Reasons why
I should leave you here
Say goodbye
But still I forgive
Everythin' you do
And the reasons why, babe,*

Are one hundred and two

You seldom dance with open eyes; you seldom dance while touching someone. You feel free from strings when a puppeteer is not there to pull your hand and lead your feet across the floor. You feel free from the strings of background, from the strings of others' eyes, when you focus on the music in your head, not the surroundings, not the puppeteer.

Brush your cheek against his stiff, hairsprayed hair and hold him close. Try to follow the sway of his hips, not the music. Don't touch your feet to his. From this angle, his chest hair seems to have been primped, coiled over his tank top for show. Perhaps that is hairsprayed, too.

At the end of the song he will lead you back to the table; watch your girlfriend and the couple on the floor. Perhaps the woman does not love the man. Perhaps they are pretending for each other. Perhaps if she closed her eyes and forgot her Saturday night clothes, she might remember herself, remember one hundred and one reasons why she should leave him here, say goodbye.

You imagine when this woman closes her eyes, her mind excuses her body as if a xylophonist playing sixteenth notes, not pausing to question rhythm for fear of bogging her spell. When she closes her eyes, she dances like a leaf in a rainstorm; and when she *dances*, her bosom jiggles double-time.

Your girlfriend and her sailor are no longer dancing. Try to see her, but she is buried in his embrace.

The silence pulls you like the dance. As your sailor sips his

beer at you, you feel compelled to fill the vacuum, to push rather than be pulled. As though pushing in his direction gives you power.

Your girlfriend is on the dance floor again. Her sailor's hands move down her blouse, up her jeans.

Lift his hand from the table and compare your fingers with his. "What," he will say. They have been dirty and strong at one time, covered with black motor oil and Lava Soap grit. Now they are clean and strong, as though they poke little sharp wires all day without pain. Tell him you are just looking.

He curls his clean, thick fingers and dips his hand in yours as though your skin were a pond.

Your girlfriend fights her sailor on the dance floor and comes to your booth, telling you to hurry, she'll be in the car.

In the night air, under your fingers, his biceps shudder as if releasing moths from the muscle tissue; the night is chilly, but you do not shiver. Grip his arm with restraint and try to squeeze back into him the tautness that led you across the floor, the tension, the strength that does pushups on command. When he shudders again, lean into him, as if your weight reconnects his strength to his will.

His tongue, like an oyster, is not aggressive. It tickles you in safety, from behind his lips which move like snails across your throat. The oyster will find your amethyst earring, contemplating your detached earlobe as you, left with nothing to kiss, nothing to say, stare at the neon light and squeeze his curled-up fingers, without restraint, in the silence.

"Goodnight," he whispers into the hole the oyster has

lubricated for words. He opens the door and closes you in.
Ignite the engine and go: do not check the rearview mirrors.
Deposit your girlfriend with what little conversation you
can spare. Wonder why he did not request your phone
number.

Turn on your music when you are home, your jazz-band
poet on CD. Take a washcloth and remove the dried trail
of slime from your neck. Darken the lights and undress; do
not evaluate your body before the mirror.

*Man, she ain't got no pity at all
with her neon kids
and secret lovers inside her smile
and meanwhile, meanwhile,
she dances nonchalantlike with endless night*

Weave your hips, jiggle your breasts, tiptoe on the hard-
wood floor, naked, in the dark, eyes closed, and realize this:
you are more like the woman on the dance floor than you
think.

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